

Pawtucket Times

Downtown district gets historic recognition

By: Douglas Hadden, Times staff writer

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PAWTUCKET - When it comes to historic status, Pawtucket's downtown has just gone uptown.

After a two-year effort by city and state officials and preservationists, the National Register of Historic Places has approved federal recognition of a 14-acre swatch, which includes 50 commercial buildings, as the Downtown Pawtucket Historic District.

The designation immediately makes the 35 historically contributing structures in the district eligible for federal and state historic tax credits.

The credits, which can be sold to investors to reduce the cost of renovation projects, have been the chief economic catalyst for numerous mill rehabs in the Blackstone Valley and throughout the state.

"That is great," enthused Richard Davis, executive director of the Pawtucket Foundation, a business-backed group that has supported numerous initiatives to improve the downtown from cleanups to plans to provide more parking.

"It's great in the way it will encourage the private investment we all want to see happen," without which the densely built area of the city would have "little ability to grow except to tear down and build from scratch."

"I think it's very significant," said Ted Sanderson, executive director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, who began working with city planning officials and Mayor James E. Doyle on the historic application two years ago.

Prior piecemeal efforts saw creation of the Church Hill Industrial District, where the former Parkin Yarn mill was transformed for residential Bayley Lofts, and the Exchange Street Historic District, which includes Tolman High School, the Armory building and the renovation of the Lebanon Mill as Riverfront Lofts.

"But I think we'd always had this sort of nagging feeling that downtown Pawtucket hadn't been adequately recognized," Sanderson said, in part due to historic pieces chopped out by 1960s-era urban renewal.

Sanderson's group funded a \$10,000 study undertaken by the city, which contracted with the city-based Public Archaeology Laboratory to identify and map historical downtown buildings, and architectural preservation consultant Kathryn Cavanaugh to piece together the historic facts and prepare the application. The city also pressed into service students in an historic preservation

class at Roger Williams University to help pin down relevant dates and other data for the historic downtown properties.

After several revisions, including to limit the submission to commercial historic structures, State Historic Preservation approved its end last September, and early this year the package was sent to the National Park Service, part of the U.S. Department of Interior, which oversees federal historic recognition and gave its approval last month.

The National Register is the official list of properties throughout the nation deemed worthy of preservation for their historical and architectural significance.

"With its collection of architecturally significant banks, shops, offices and civic buildings, the Downtown Pawtucket Historic District represents the city's growth as a prosperous industrial city between the Civil War and World War I," said State Historic Preservation special projects official Sarah Zurier.

Sanderson praised supporters such as Doyle, City Planner Michael Cassidy and Riverfront Lofts developer Ranne Warner for making the designation a reality.

The effort also shows that everything old becomes new again: To be eligible as contributing, properties generally must be 50 or more years old.

The 50-year threshold had limited prior similar efforts in the mid-1970s, Cassidy noted.

"This will mean the opportunity (for tax credits) for buildings yet to be restored and rehabilitated," such as the former Feldman Furniture building (built in 1892 as a livery stable) at Summer and North Union streets, the late-Victorian Beswick building (1891) between Broad and Summer streets (home to the News Café and River Café), the McDevitt Building (1888, remodeled in 1923) at Broad and North Union streets, and the Colonial-revival former Pawtucket Boys Club building (1902) on East Avenue, he said.

Included are four structures already on the National Register: The Deborah Cook Sayles Public Library at 13 Summer St. (1899-1902), the domed Old Post Office at 1 Summer St. (later made an adjunct to the library), completed in 1897, the 1926 Elks Lodge at 27-37 Exchange St., now being renovated for an antiques seller, bookseller and other uses, and the The Times building (1895) at 23 Exchange St.

"It's a feather in the city's cap," said Matt Kierstead, a leader in the downtown PADS group and a principal in PAL Inc., said of the listing. "And far more important, it's a practical tool from the standpoint that it makes all the contributing properties eligible the federal and state historic tax credits."

Kierstead said he expected one immediate beneficiary would be The Grant at 250 Main St., the recent remake of the Woolworth building for graphics and other professional uses.

While the city's landmark 307-acre Arts & Entertainment has provided "a good planning tool and

incentive" to attract arts and other reuses, Kierstead said getting on the National Register would economically provide a "bigger incentive due to the credits."

Sanderson said statewide, the credits, which the governor's office and General Assembly are considering scaling back, have sparked \$1.5 billion in investment over the past six years, chiefly of the long-neglected old mill structures the state and particularly Blackstone Valley are so rich in, but many of which over the years have been subject to numerous fires.

"How do you keep a mill from burning down? The best way is to fix it up and put it to new use," said Sanderson. "To me, they're landmarks of the history of the working people of Blackstone Valley."

The credits, Sanderson said, "have made a huge difference in cities like Pawtucket that have a number of historic buildings that needed renovation or still need renovation."

Sale of the credits is allowed for 20 percent of construction cost for the federal credits, which require housing units be rentals for at least five years, and 30 percent for the state credits, which apply without such restrictions and thus can apply to condominium units.

"I think this is the future of Rhode Island - developing (old mill properties) for the next 50 years," particularly throughout Blackstone Valley, Sanderson said.

Davis of the Pawtucket Foundation agreed.

"The states are getting more competitive. If Rhode Island wants to go backward, there's always places like North Carolina, there's always opportunity for (major mill redevelopers like) Streuver Bros. to be able to go elsewhere," he said.

The historic designation still leaves private property owners free to "maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose," according to Zurier of State Historic Preservation. Upgrades that are done historically are eligible for the tax credits.

According to the application, the downtown historic district encompasses such architectural styles as Late Victorian, Beaux Arts, Neoclassical, Colonial Revival, Art Moderne and International, but have many common elements: Brick composition, two to three stories high, close proximity to urban streetscape neighbors and sidewalks, and "a regular rhythm of window openings" on upper levels.

Among other structures making the list were the McHale Building (1947), 34 East Ave., former home to E.L. Freeman Co.; Costello Bros. building (1921), 65 East Ave., now Adams Furniture; former Veloria Apartments/Hotel (1928), 50-54 Exchange St.; the wooden Strauss-Appelles House (c. 1871), 9 Grant St., and Nickerson-Clapp House (1871), 10 Grant St.; New England Telephone building (1948) at 85 High St. former telephone building (1914, now Salvation Army) at 100 High St., and Monast Apartments (1927) at 110 High St.; Pawtucket Insurance Co. building on Maple Street; and Slater Trust building at 208-210 Main St.